

Jesus And The Demon-Possessed Man – Teresa Holden

Isaiah 65:1-9; Psalm 22:19-28; Galatians 3:23-29; Luke 8:26-39

When I was growing up, we lived in a house that my parents built, on a lot my grandparents had given them on one end of their farm. (This was in northern Indiana, very close to Grace College, where our son, David, goes to school now.) My grandpa grew a variety of crops on his farm (my favorite of which was popcorn), and he kept different forms of livestock. By the time I was born, all of their children had families of their own and couldn't help on the farm, so Grandpa had downsized, no longer keeping chickens or sheep, but he still kept pigs and cows. I was horrified of the cows—they seemed huge to me as a child; one of our family stories was about how a herd of my grandpa's cows had begun a stampede (running huge circles around the pasture—which they actually did fairly frequently), and one day when my older brother was a baby they crashed through the fence on the border of our lot. He was sitting in the front yard, not even at an age where he could walk yet, and my mom had to rush to scoop him up out of the way of the galloping cows. On the other hand, in my uninformed child mind, I thought the pigs were nice and docile, not a threat to anyone. Of course, I've learned from hog farmers here in this area that this couldn't be further from the truth. Apparently, pigs are mean, even vicious, but when I was a child, Grandpa would let me and my siblings get in the pig pen with litters of baby pigs soon after they were born. He would barricade the Mama Pig in a different pen because he told us that the Mama was very protective of her piglets. Then he would let us frolic in the pen with the little pigs. They were so cute with their coarse hair, curled tails and perpetual smiles. I don't know why piglets always look like they're smiling, but I'm sure this is the quality that has spurred all of the children's stories about pigs.

At the heart of today's gospel reading is a huge herd of pigs into whom Jesus sends a legion of demons at the request of those demons. The man who was afflicted with the demons (to begin with) returns to his right mind, but the townspeople who learn of this event are stunned and scared. In order to understand this story, I would like to consider it from the perspectives of the man, the pig herders and the townspeople to determine what this event meant to each. Ultimately this story and all of our Scriptures reveal God's love that doesn't privilege any particular group, but reaches far and wide to heal, restore and liberate all.

First, let's set the stage. Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee from Capernaum to Gerasenes. I learned from my study this month that the Sea of Galilee is small, shaped somewhat like a human heart; it is (at its widest) eight miles across from east to west and thirteen miles long. Because of its small size and because mostly cliffs surround it, people in the region could watch from the cliffs to spot traffic crossing the sea and could (if they wanted to) see where Jesus and his disciples were travelling. Although the two regions of Capernaum and Gerasenes are relatively close geographically, the cultural differences between the two at that time were vast. Politically and culturally, the region around the Sea of Galilee reflected the diverse multiculturalism of the Roman Empire, as three different political territories bordered its shores. To the west lay Galilee, a largely Jewish area where a Jewish worldview prevailed. Capernaum was in Galilee. An examination of all four gospels allows us to know that on this trip Jesus crossed the Sea of Galilee starting from Capernaum. His destination, Gerasenes, was in the Decapolis, on the northeastern shore of the sea directly across from Capernaum. The Decapolis

was the most thoroughly Roman of the three political regions that surrounded the Sea of Galilee. It had the smallest population of Jewish people and was least influenced by a Jewish worldview, and thus, people in this region kept large herds of pigs.¹

Remember that pigs are considered totally unclean by Jewish people. Their historic abstinence from and disdain for pigs is affirmed by the fact that zooarcheologists, (people who study animal bones that are found at archeological sites) find that they can locate ethnic boundaries between Jewish people and their neighbors because of the absence of pig remains in Jewish areas. Most believe that Hebrew Law prohibits consumption of pork or contact with pigs because of the fact that pigs eat literally everything, and, most notably, they eat garbage. In fact, pigs have been used in history as garbage cleaners in cities where they were, at times, set loose in city streets to consume the garbage and thus clean the streets.² So Jesus has traveled from a predominantly Jewish region to a region that is decidedly not Jewish, and there he meets a man who is inhabited by demons.

It seems that this man, naked and homeless, is the welcoming committee for Jesus, as he meets him on the shore. Strangely, he shouts his opening greeting, which is a plea for Jesus not to torment him. It's easy to miss, with everything going on in this passage, that before the man even asks, Jesus has begun a process of liberating him by first (as the text says) [*commanding*] *the unclean spirit to come out of the man*. Why does this man greet Jesus by shouting and begging Jesus not to torment him? Perhaps, as verse 29 tells us, this is because others in the past had bound him in *chains and shackles* to control his behavior. They had tormented him because of the effects of the demons that had taken over his mind and physical being. Throughout this entire story, in contrast, Jesus seems completely unperturbed by this man's shouting, his nakedness or the fact that he exhibits evidence of having numerous demonic personalities within him. The man, himself, is consumed by the demons' malicious presence in his life, and they cause him to be totally debilitated.

Some theologians lean toward interpreting the demonic forces that Jesus encounters in his ministry as being what we would consider physical or mental illnesses. I'm not totally satisfied with this explanation, yet having some knowledge of the history of medicine over the past 200 years, I know that until the discovery of penicillin in 1928, the world's understanding of most diseases was minimal; the gospel writers could be describing a whole number of things under the umbrella of demon possession. In this instance, however, the demons become personified in a herd of pigs.

I think it's more useful for us to think of these demons as being, exactly that—demons—and perhaps more like what we recognize as demons in our own lives. We all recognize that we have areas of our lives that we need Jesus to liberate, so that we can more fully be our best selves, the people God made us to be. Whether these be bad habits, worries, fear, a bad temper, gluttony, jealousy, ego—all of these could be described as demons, because they can prevent us, at times, from being in our right minds. We, too, can be completely consumed by these things, so that we don't even think about fulfilling our calling in Christ. We, too, need deliverance and liberation by Jesus.

Interestingly, in this story the demons interact with Jesus, and ask to be sent into a herd of pigs rather than to be sent back to hell. They want to continue their malicious shenanigans on earth by instigating a deadly stampede over the cliff and into the sea below. As I said earlier, I frequently witnessed herds of cows stampeding in circles in the field beside our house when I was growing up, but as I was writing this, I wasn't sure whether pigs commonly stampede. Apparently, they do when they are startled and frightened. I learned this from an October 2014 newspaper account in the *New Zealand Herald*. There the owners of the Low Moor Farm had registered with the Civil Aviation Authority because low-flying hot air balloons caused pig stampedes. Nevertheless, according to the article, a hot air balloon carrying tourists didn't heed the regulation and flew too low over the farm with this result (from the article):

The pigs had been in their pens but were so terrified by the sight of the red-and-white-striped balloon and the noise from its burners that they charged through fences, stampeded 200 yards and ended up in a ditch at the end of the field. In the melee, 140 sows miscarried 70 per cent of their litters - around 800 piglets. Three sows died from heart attacks and a boar died the next day from his injuries.³

Obviously, pigs are prone to stampede, and in our gospel story, they are instigated to do this because of the demons. Of course, to the pig herders, this was as much of a disaster as it was to the people of the Low Moor Farm. Their loss was exponential, depending on how many sows were about to deliver and how many had heart attacks, but the loss isn't what the Gospel story focuses on. The people who witness the event don't seem to blame Jesus for what happened. The townspeople who run to see what has happened witness a remarkable contrast—while the pigs are over the cliff, the crazy, naked man is actually clothed; he's in his right mind, and talking to this Jesus, the man who had been creating such a stir in Galilee. They see that the crazy man has been healed. Who has this kind of power, they wonder—who is this healer?

As the people put together the pieces of this story, they become afraid. They aren't angry. They don't yell at Jesus. Rather, they ask; they beg for him to leave. It seems like this show of power is too much for them, and they don't want to deal with the totality of what this means—a Jewish man came and healed the crazy man, causing the stampede of a herd of 2000 pigs. It was beyond comprehension, and the type of event that sent a shiver down their spine, because it suggested that something was true about the universe that they had never before considered. Jesus doesn't protest against their pleas for him to leave, he only commissions the healed man to make his life a declaration of what God did for him. This episode is an early signal that Jesus came for everyone—for crazy, naked men in Decapolis and for all of his Gentile neighbors and friends there.

All our Scriptures announce this truth—faith in God is for all. Isaiah 65:1 proclaims that God wants to be found by those who aren't even seeking. Psalm 22:27 tells us that *All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord and ... shall worship before [God]*. Galatians 3:28 explicitly says, *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus*.

Returning to the story of the demon-possessed man in Decapolis, it's interesting that the disciples don't enter into this story at all. It starts at verse 26. Over the course of the previous 25

verses, Jesus has a lot of interactions with the disciples. They ask, and he explains the parable of the sower. He then shares with them the analogy of the lamp that is not hidden but put on the lamp stand, as He says, *so that those who come in can see the light*. Next, Jesus tells his disciples, *Let us go over to the other side of the lake*. (NIV) They start out and before they land in Geresenes, their boat gets caught in a storm while Jesus is sleeping. The disciples awaken him to tell him they're about to drown, and Jesus speaks and calms the storm. Verse 25 says that after this, *In fear and amazement [the disciples] asked each other, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."* (NIV) Then they land at Geresenes and watch the entire encounter between Jesus and the screaming, naked man and the pigs and pig herders and townspeople.

The disciples through the course of this chapter come to understand, like the people of Gerasenes, that something is happening that they had never before considered. They are doing some experiential learning that demonstrates to them the breadth and depth of God's love for every person: for a naked, homeless man from Decapolis, a Gentile of all things, and for all of those unclean Decapolis people who kept pigs. These were the people that Jesus commissioned the now-healed and clothed and liberated man to share his story of God's love with.

This is our calling as well—to find our own liberation available through Jesus, and to love the unloved, the despicable, the people who are considered and marked as unclean. We don't get to choose who God loves, but we are called to share God's love with everyone.

¹ Cyndi Parker, "Crossing to 'The Other Side' Of The Sea Of Galilee," 157-164 *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*, Barry J. Beitzel, ed., 158-161.

² Chris McKinny, "Pig Husbandry in Israel During the New Testament, 183-195, *Ibid*, 183-184.

³ https://www.nzherald.co.nz/world/news/article.cfm?c_id=2&objectid=11342822